Inside and Outside the Public Sphere

Ruth H. Bloch

WHAT does the term "public sphere" mean, and how do scholars draw its boundaries? A once specific theoretical concept has come perilously close to dissolving into mush. Perhaps this dissolution is the fate of all analytically charged and rhetorically powerful terms, such as "class," "culture," and "gender," to name a few other examples from the past forty years. There is a special irony in the case of the public sphere, for this moment seems peculiarly anti-Habermasian: the more publications refer to the public sphere, the less "communicative rationality" (to use his words) informs the term's meaning.[1] Yet the creative contributions produced in the name of the public sphere by early Americanists and others during the last fifteen years have been indisputably stunning. And in the work of some, especially historians of political culture, the underlying Habermasian concept, albeit revised, retains enough of a theoretical edge to prove critical to their interpretations. As the concept grows and stretches in any number of directions, however, becoming synonymous with words such as "public," "the public," "publicity," "print culture," and "civil society," there is a real question about its continuing ability to furnish analytical leverage even as it becomes permanently absorbed into the academic lexicon.

The malleability of the term is partly due to its schizoid inception as both an ideal type and a historical entity. The Habermasian public sphere is best seen as a normative ideal of democratic politics. But in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* Habermas, drawing on his Frankfurt School roots as a critic of mass culture, also described it as a historical reality—a kind of rationalist golden age fated to succumb to the assaults of consumerism and mass culture. When read as a purely historical account, the book describes a series of stages through which democratic political culture at first rose in the late eighteenth century and then fell in the nineteenth century. As John L. Brooke has elsewhere observed, this grand narrative attracts the attention of historians more

Ruth H. Bloch is a professor in the Department of History, UCLA. She wishes to thank Naomi Lamoreaux for help with this article.

[1] Habermas's theory of communicative rationality is most importantly developed in Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action,* vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society,* trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, 1984).

William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Series, Volume LXII, Number 1, January 2005

than Habermas's difficult philosophical elaborations in other works.[2] Even in the quite accessible *Structural Transformation,* however, it is clear that the dynamism of the public sphere inheres in the democratic political agency that Habermas ascribes to it. Separate from the state in the sense of being unrestricted by legal regulation, its function is nonetheless state oriented. Within the public sphere, fellow citizens deliberate over their common course as a people, and this discussion gives rise to the force of public opinion that makes the state accountable to them. It is not only a static conceptual category between state and society but also the key moment of transition from private life into democratic self-government. The concept has deep roots in classical political theory, positing an ideal whereby individuals freely reflect on and, as a collectivity, influence the official exercise of state power.

Overly schematic and out of date in various respects, Habermas's historical description of the public sphere, written in 1962 but not translated into English until 1989, inspired multiple important revisions by historians and others during the 1990s. Thanks to this revisionist undertaking, those scholars invoking the public sphere no longer conceive it as bourgeois but as encompassing historically oppressed groups. The term, as the article by Joanna Brooks illustrates, has been productively pluralized into alternative public spheres and counterpublics. Its originally masculine bias has also been transformed to accord recognition to the participation of women. Even the original stress on the importance of print culture in the public sphere has been historicized in ways that include more attention to unpublished writing and to spoken language as well as to visual symbols and performative rituals. As Harold Mah has emphasized, some stress Habermas's institutional examples and spatial metaphors, concretizing the public sphere into specific associational groupings (for example, Freemasonry) or actual places (including taverns and streets), whereas others concentrate on the more abstract and disembodied process of opinion formation.[3] Within the field of early American studies, these divisions generally correspond to disciplinary

[2] John L. Brooke, "Reason and Passion in the Public Sphere: Habermas and the Cultural Historians," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29, no. 1 (Summer 1998): 43–67.

[3] Literature from the 1990s is voluminous and some of it has been cited elsewhere in this issue. Important collections of criticism that have influenced my own perspective include Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1993); Johanna Meehan, ed., *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse* (New York, 1995). The attention Mah gives to the problem of the public as "mass subject," however, reflects the particular interests of European historians. Harold Mah, "Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians," *Journal of Modern History* 72, no. 1 (March 2000): 153–82.

distinctions, splits between historians of literature who study texts and historians of political culture who study popular movements and organizations.

These changes and variations in the historical rendering of the public sphere—all valuable in themselves—arguably salvage the concept without necessarily losing its political essence. Keeping their focus on popular politics, historians such as Mary P. Ryan and David Waldstreicher have continued to view the public sphere as the precondition of inclusive, participatory, and egalitarian democracy. To be sure, revisionist interpretations cut deeply into Habermas's theoretical concerns when they discard his normative criterion of rationality. But among literary historians, especially, Habermas's original emphasis on the democratizing effects of communicative process, if not his stress on rationalism, still remains strong. Michael Warner most notably develops this side of Habermas's argument when he underscores the impersonal appeal of publications to an anonymous readership and presents the public sphere as raising consciousness of political issues among people outside government, thereby mobilizing the force of collective opinion in pursuit of political goals.[4] As in the original Habermasian formulation, the public sphere conceptualized by this group of literary and political historians continues to mediate between the citizenry and the state. It is still political in the narrow sense of bearing on the workings of government.

As the term has increasingly taken on a life of its own, a far more expansive definition of the public sphere has begun to break this political connection. At times the depoliticization is intentional, as when Bryan Waterman's article argues on behalf of a religious rather than a partisan interpretation of *Wieland*. Desiring to situate religious debate within the public sphere, he nonetheless dissociates religion from political disputes and considers the weight of New England clerical authority without reference, for example, to ongoing conflicts over church-state relations. Susan Juster's insightful book on popular prophecy similarly incorporates religious concerns into an indeterminate public sphere, borrowing from Habermas's stress on the rise of publicity yet not attributing to her colorful figures any significant role in revolutionary political transformation.[5] At other times scholars adhere to what seems like a political definition of the public sphere, but one so open that it encompasses virtually all

[4] Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

[5] Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2003).

expressions of any aspect of political ideology or national identity, whether or not they take a discernable position or influence the course of political activity. The otherwise fascinating connection between stories about hermits and the problem of revolutionary individualism that appears in Eric Slauter's article, for example, has nothing directly to do with the central Habermasian theme of democratic mobilization. It goes without saying that eighteenth-century literary and cultural historians have long been exploring the plots, characters, and language of texts to analyze tensions within revolutionary concepts such as virtue, equality, self-sufficiency, and natural rights. Well before Habermas's theory became widely known in the 1990s, this interest in the ideological implications of literature intensified in the 1970s and 1980s, owing much more to the stimulus of the republicanism-liberalism debate and to the near-simultaneous emphasis within postmodern literary theory on discourses of power. As much as these political readings of the multivalent language of fiction may enrich scholars' understanding of revolutionary and nationalist ideas, they share little of Habermas's distinctive interest in the preconditions of deliberative and participatory democracy. Once definitions of the public sphere become this attenuated, virtually all scholarship on the intellectual and cultural history of the Revolution and early Republic may lay claim to it.

The easiest way out of this terminological impasse would be to junk the concept altogether or agree to divest it of analytic significance. Before doing so, however, it is perhaps worth taking more seriously the boundaries Habermas draws between the public sphere and other aspects of society and cultural expression that are not, in his terms, political. Literary historians, for example, might well still benefit from employing Habermas's distinction between the "public sphere in the world of letters" and "the political public sphere." Much like Ian Watt, Habermas describes eighteenth-century literary forms, especially letter writing and the epistolary novel, as reflecting a newfound desire on the part of bourgeois individuals to subject their inner selves to external scrutiny. This literary development, far from already encapsulating critical debates about government, in Habermas's view still partly emulated an earlier royal and aristocratic culture of status display. Here again Habermas lays out a sequential course of progress toward democratic discourse. The literary public sphere might have taken a critical first step out of the restrictive domains of the court and the family, yet it was the next phase of development, the political public sphere, that held the promise of the more important and egalitarian transformation of the state. Though scholars have gone far to identify similar language and themes in the literary and the political writings of the period, the substantive and

chronological distinctions between them have garnered far less attention. One especially notable exception is David S. Shields's fascinating work on the sociable but essentially nonpolitical elite circle of writers in the prerevolutionary period.[6] Here readers may catch a glimpse of Habermas's literary public sphere at its earliest and still semiprivate moment of inception.

To get a better grip on the meaning and scope of the public sphere it is also important to ask more about the meaning and scope of the private sphere. Bryan Waterman, Eric Slauter, and Joanna Brooks all indirectly address this question when they illuminate tensions posed by secrecy and solitude within the public sphere. Here too, however, Habermas's own systematic theory may repay closer analysis. One of the most intriguing features of Habermas's argument is that his concept of public depends on his concept of private. Inasmuch as the private refers to economic interests and involves the rise of capitalism, the relationship of private to public is relatively clear. According to Habermas's historical narrative in *Structural Transformation,* the expansion of the market at first facilitated the rise of the bourgeois public sphere but then, in the nineteenth century, the emergence of mass commercial culture contaminated its democratic promise. Historians interested in the economics and ideology of early American publishing have already gone far in addressing this set of Habermasian issues. More broadly across the academic disciplines, the post-1989 revival of Habermas's theory of the public sphere derives largely from his appealing skepticism about the free market combined with his strong commitment to open democratic deliberation.

Far more neglected than this economic-political distinction, the boundary Habermas draws between what he refers to as the intimate sphere of the bourgeois conjugal family and the public sphere still deserves more consideration. According to *Structural Transformation,* this intimate sphere played a critical historical role in the generation of the public sphere by supplying a psychological depth to eighteenth-century individuals' most basic conceptions of themselves and their relationships to others. It was, Habermas argues, this set of personal preoccupations that originally sought collective expression and clarification through debate in public. For him the public sphere of letters embodied the first phase of this transition, and the next phase within the political public sphere continued the same basic quest of self-realization that had begun within the family. Habermas, like most scholars who make a distinction between public and private, assumes that the

[6] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley, Calif., 1957); David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997).

truly private is an inviolate zone beyond the reach of corrupt external controls. Though he acknowledges that in historical reality the economic interests of the bourgeois family compromised its integrity, he nonetheless refers to the intimate sphere in universalist language as "humanity's genuine site."[7] What is most striking about his account of the origins of the public sphere is that he predicates his ideal of rationalist deliberation on a growing consciousness of human subjectivity, a process that he, like Charles Taylor, attributes to the eighteenth century. Without this privately generated consciousness, the public sphere would not exist. For Habermas, unlike the classical thinkers who similarly upheld joint ideals of participatory government and self-realization, the citizens who engage in political debate bring preexisting personal identities into the public sphere, translating their discoveries of themselves and their intimate relations within the family into general, impersonal, and ultimately political terms.

To his great credit, Habermas overcomes a longstanding tradition within democratic theory that discounts and often disparages personal relationships within the family. His emphasis on this new "interiorized human closeness" takes an important step away from viewing relationships within the household as unchanging and irrelevant to the higher quests of public life.[8] His exclusion of women from the public sphere still, to be sure, reflects the classical elevation of male sociability above the mundane realm of women in the household—a problem that feminist revisionists have gone far to address by highlighting women's political activism. His artificial divide between the family and the economy similarly draws criticism for failing to recognize the material value of unpaid production and reproduction within the home. Critics have also rightly taken him to task for ignoring the persistent inequalities within the household and the ways that government, through law, has contributed to the structuring of these relationships.

Habermas's most fundamental failing in this regard is that he idealizes the bourgeois intimate sphere, just as he idealizes the bourgeois public sphere. Once again he blurs normative and historical categories. Though he maintains a porous boundary between the public and the private, the significant flow is all from the private to the public and in

[7] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 52.

[8] Ibid. In this attribution of primary identity to the private, Margaret R. Somers shrewdly observes an affinity between Habermas and American structural-functionalism of the 1950s. However, she stresses Habermas's ideas of the market and not the family. Margaret R. Somers, "What's Political or Cultural about Political Culture and the Public Sphere? Toward an Historical Sociology of Concept Formation," *Sociological Theory* 13, no. 2 (July 1995): 113–44.

the case of familial intimacy, unlike economic interests, there appears to be no downside to its genuine influence. Whereas Habermas laudably resists polarizing public and private into a simple dichotomy as far as his understanding of political life is concerned—the public sphere constitutes an important third category of analysis between private citizens and the state—when he contrasts the intimacy of the household to the impersonality of the public sphere, he reinscribes the dichotomous public-private divide. If his basic notion of politics derives from the classical tradition, Habermas's notion of the family derives from the very period of the eighteenth century he describes.

Not only the idealization of the family but also the very tendency to attribute the word private to the family seems largely a product of the eighteenth century. Use of the term private in American publications prior to 1750, primarily from New England, suggests that public and private were not then fundamentally oppositional terms.[9] The panoply of meanings associated with the private ranged from the keeping of secrets, to exclusive gatherings, to nonchartered monetary interests, to extraecclesiastical religious associations, to the household as a collective entity or place, to individual religious conscience. The church, not the government, most often appeared on the public side of the linguistic divide. Among these various uses, the application of the word private to the family meant simply to distinguish the household from the church as a site of worship, the public and private not viewed in opposition but as serving the same sacred purpose. The dyadic relationship of the concepts of public and private at times gave way entirely to triads and quartets of terms that further diluted the either-or character. Private sometimes appeared as an intermediary category between the public and the solitary, with the private and the family at times standing for decidedly different points on the spectrum.

During the revolutionary period, this multiplicity of meanings contracted and the concept of the private became more narrowly set off against the power of government. The vigorous criticism of British tyranny within the patriot movement generated a pervasive devaluation of the state that became a persistent feature of American political culture. Revolutionary efforts to curb the reach of central government continued into the partisan struggles of the 1790s and culminated with the defeat of the Federalist program in 1800. In addition to limiting the

[9] These findings vary significantly from the definitions available in the Oxford English Dictionary. This paragraph, drawn from Evans Online, and the concluding statements to follow are partial summaries of Ruth Bloch and Naomi Lamoreaux, "Defining Public and Private in Early America" (unpublished paper prepared for the Columbia Seminar on Early American History, Columbia University, New York, Apr. 13, 2004).

power of the state, this deeply antipolitical outcome of the American Revolution encouraged the proliferation of numerous voluntary institutions during the early Republic to fill the gap, including disestablished churches, Sunday schools, moral reform societies, internal improvement associations, and charitable artisan organizations.

These voluntary institutions typically defined themselves in apolitical terms, disavowing partisan loyalties and promoting goals such as religious education, moral discipline, and mutual caretaking more closely associated with the family than with government. Much like heads of households and businesses, representatives of such organizations often insisted on their private status to defend their institutional autonomy. This notion of institutional private rights frequently involved the exclusion of others and the maintenance of internally hierarchical structures of authority. At times some voluntary associations, most notably antislavery societies, took a decidedly political turn and, together with political parties, began to resemble aspects of what Habermas had in mind with the public sphere. In other respects, however, this world of associational discourse and activism is more accurately characterized as a depoliticized sphere of fragmented, private institutions.

Spilling over the confines of the family and the economy into the arena of voluntary organizations, notions of the private after the Revolution still applied mostly to institutions. Only since the mid-twentieth century has the dominant American understanding expanded to include individual rights to privacy. Ironically, since the 1970s the claim of privacy has itself become a major source of opposition politics, and in some legal contexts the struggle for privacy rights has proven to be a highly effective means of promoting collective social equality. This complex and changing relationship between the public and the private in American history frequently eludes the particular categories framed by Habermas. And yet his delineation of many subtle variations within the private and the public spheres, as well as his brilliant effort to elucidate the long-term historical interactions between them, still provides historians with an inspiring example to follow.